

Symmetry

At the most general symmetry is the rule and asymmetry is the exception. An artist or an architect can, of course, use both or use only asymmetry, but I long ago reached an agreement with what I consider the primary condition: art, for myself, and architecture for everyone, should always be symmetrical except for a good reason. The idea of a primary condition leads to scientific and philosophical questions which are relevant, although not determining, but which are too large and complex to try to understand here. These questions are not determining because the use of symmetry and asymmetry is ours, and is related only indirectly, in the nature of things, as all things are, to the world. Reasons for symmetry or asymmetry should not be made out of those aspects as they occur in the world, if in fact there the distinction even holds. The primacy of symmetry in art and architecture is not very definitive or restrictive because there are so many kinds, some very close to asymmetry, such as some of the numerical progressions that I use. Absolute symmetry is marvelous and it's also marvelous when symmetry itself allows variation, when the logic of the situation causes or allows an approach to symmetry. For example, the position to the rear of an apse doesn't seem as asymmetrical because it can only be there or to the front. The absent position is present by implication.

If asymmetry is an exception its occurrence is to be questioned more than that of symmetry. Often, especially now when so much architecture is merely zig-zags and protuberances, asymmetry indicates the absence of a reason. A good reason in both art and architecture is the configuration of the land that the structures are on. Existing buildings are a reason. In buildings function can be a reason if the requirement is real and not petty. In the United States the present time is becoming characterized by the falsification of everything public, everything visible, and even function, as hard a fact as it seems, is being perverted to decorative and bureaucratic

uses. Last year two city planners in Providence, Rhode Island, having planned for three years a meaningless plaza, told a friend and me that the little undulations in the curb of the long central mall were places to park two or three cars. When we objected that the resulting shape was banal and that its purpose was trivial, we were accused of ignoring function. But there was plenty of space elsewhere to park cars, not an ultimate problem anyway. The real purpose of the 'functional' undulations is to be decorative, is to be 'creative', is to do something, anything, to the long dead rectangle that the two planners have made of a row of nineteenth century circles. This is the symmetry of a lump made asymmetrical by poking a finger in it.

In the fifties, my paintings were at first semi-abstract and then abstract, at first somewhat geometric in my version of the type established by, among others, Leger and Stuart Davis. Later they were 'abstract expressionist', in a way influenced by Pollock, whose paintings, though, are not all expressionist in the usual sense. The partial geometry, with flat even areas, suited me, and expressionism did not, but the geometry, related as it was to the space of traditional European painting, was too old and irrelevant in meaning. Pollock's work provided a way to emphasize the surface of the paint and of the whole painting. In its 'overall' nature there was little traditional European composition, which is definitely asymmetrical in a specific way. At this point I had seen but hardly understood Newman's paintings, which ultimately are much more my way of thinking. My version of expressionism was far less radical than Pollock's and so continued suggestions of the old immediacy, that of immediate feeling, of the European tradition. In leaving this the surfaces of my paintings became plain, even and brightly colored. Strokes and touches became lines, at first organic, then curved and later straight. This change divided a painting into two parts, the large, broad rectangle and the narrow lines. Once the lines became straight, the problem of where to place them became more serious. The distinction between symmetry and asymmetry arose. What did the terms mean? Was a choice necessary? There seemed to be no reason for asymmetry. I

began centering groups of lines of the broad rectangle, slightly high on the canvas to counter the effect of the true center seeming low. Later in some reliefs single elements were centered. In one relief, done at the time of the paintings, the vertical rectangle is divided into quarters, each brown, by a recessed cross painted cadmium red light. Quartering is symmetrical and practical and in the last five years I've used it for gates, doors and windows. In the first three-dimensional pieces in 1962 the elements, now less discrete due to being three-dimensional, were all centered. In a work placed on the floor, made in 1963, a trough cut in the upward surface is very carefully placed on no particular division at all, which is not so easy. Later I placed elements on the half-way point of a work or a wall, or on the points which divide those into thirds, fourths or fifths.

When the exclusive use of symmetry became probable, I worried that it would be very restrictive and also that the unity I considered necessary in a work would become a trap allowing little variation. This was a pretty unnecessary worry, but it resulted in the horizontal pieces on the wall, based on extruded aluminum tubes, that used numerical progressions. There is variation visually but the spaces and solids, really volumes, underneath and behind the tubes, are arithmetically ordered, so that there is no old composition. In one kind of work the volumes double in length in one direction and the spaces between double in the other. In another, the volumes and spaces are related in an inverse natural number series, $1-1/2+1/3-1/4+1/5-1/6\infty$. There is also a piece based on the Fibonacci series. The inverse natural number series looks symmetrical, since the variation is so regular.

After the piece on the floor cut by a trough all of my work has been symmetrical, clearly so. It is not asymmetry to recess the top of a rectangular work sitting on the floor or to place a sheet of metal evenly to one side in a work that is primarily a tube. This placement has an implied symmetry like the apse at the far end.

A complete discussion of symmetry requires more time. These are

some further subjects. Four things placed in a row, a small and local order, is symmetrical, but are five things in a row symmetrical? If the proportion of two sides of a rectangle is 1:2 it is symmetrical, but if the proportion is 2:3 or 3:5 is it symmetrical? And what forms can a proportional element take? Most concentric arrangements are symmetrical: a wall around a house, or two walls, or a house around a courtyard. What are the possibilities and how can variation occur? Certainly in relation to the land. In architecture all aspects have to be considered in regard to symmetry. To me, just realigning the doors and windows, if possible, of old buildings so as to be opposite one another or on an axis, is a great improvement. Other than function, there's no reason why doors and windows should be haphazard. Those of Ronchamp are instant history, the pop of a slow occurrence, which is contradiction, and so are folksy, as the Swiss source is not. Small buildings should be symmetrical and the plan for an area of a city should be so as well. Buildings in a city should also be symmetrical from top to bottom, on the street and on the skyline, and not snaggle-toothed like New York.

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